***When given a larger paper to work on, I always look for texts that give me a good deal to work with. There is nothing more frustrating than getting five pages into an eight page paper and realizing you have run out of information. To that effect, I chose to look at Spenser’s The Faerie Queene because I felt it afforded me the most to work with. There are so many ways to go with this topic that I figured, although the text is difficult, that I would have plenty to play around with. I decided to focus on Spenser’s use of allegory as it is a major crux of the text and, to focus things more, its uses as a weapon against the Catholic Church.***

Edmund Spenser lived during a tumultuous time for England. The reign of the Protestant Queen Elizabeth was a Post-Reformation era for England, meaning England was supposed to be prominently Protestant. This, however, was not always the case as there still remained many a staunch Catholic who vehemently protested against the Elizabethan Age and its Protestant ways. Spenser, who was a devout Protestant and devotee to Queen Elizabeth, saw the corruption in the Catholic Church and saw Catholicism as not only the wrong religion but the antithesis of what religion was supposed to be. He turned to his writing as a means of showcasing his opinions and ideas about why the Catholic Church had become such a lowly organization. In his seminal work *The Faerie Queene* Spenser weaves an epic tale of sweeping proportions. Spenser utilized allegory, which is when an object or person is symbolic of something else, in his poem in order to personify many of the things that he perceived as wrong with the Catholic Church. Here, we will look at what, specifically, Spenser allegorizes and how he utilizes this technique for maximum effect against the Catholic Church. We will concern ourselves chiefly with Book One of *The Faerie Queene* which concerns the Redcrosse Knight and his journeys.

***Like my essay on Sir Gawain, I start this essay out with one of my scholarly sources so that I can produce a clear definition of allegory and what that means in Spenser’s text. I figured it would be easier to focus on what was happening in the rest of the paper if the reader had a clear and concise idea of what Spenser was working within his own text. In turn, this helped me create a cleaner and easy to read paper…at least I think it does. I thought the fancy indented quotation would look pretty cool as well as the quote was on the longer side. I wanted to give Nohrnberg his credit here as well so I figured I would give him center stage for starters.***

We can begin by looking deeper at the “why” and the “how” Spenser uses allegory in *The Faerie Queene*. In James Nohrnberg’s *The Analogy of The Faerie Queene* he states that:

*“Literary survey often describes a given work as “an allegory” in the same way that one might classify a play as a comedy. This usage is misleading where it implies that allegory is a genre in its own right—we only have to glance at Spenser to discover that allegory may be found in pastoral, elegy, satire, dream-vision, romance, and in sacred and profane mythology. We are not dealing with a genre but a theory of poetry.”* (Nohrnberg, 89)

Nohrnberg tells us that allegory is an idea more than a style of writing. Spenser wanted to create an epic where he could outline the methods to becoming the perfect man or perfect Christian utilizing this idea. This was clearly done as an attack on the corruption in the Catholic Church during the 1500s. He does not need to say this is an obvious manner but its meaning is implied. The idea of allegory as a weapon is an intriguing one for sure but how exactly does it work? Spenser uses allegory to attack the detractors of Protestantism and Queen Elizabeth. He turns them into hideous figures and monsters that represent the greedy and power hungry clergy of the Catholic Church. Quite practically, allegory lets Spenser say what he wanted to say without really saying it. That is to say, he was able to speak his mind about his feelings for the Catholic Church but could wipe his hands clean in the end. Having the favor of Queen Elizabeth certainly was not hurting matters either for Spenser for this allowed him the freedom to write the way he wanted to write. He could create this world where the Catholic Church could be seen as the corruptors that they were.

***Since the Redcrosse Knight plays such an integral part in the beginning of Spenser’s text and in my own writing, I wanted to focus on him to start my own analysis of the text. In class, we had talked about Redcrosse being something of a Christ figure and it dawned on me that King Arthur, in British literature, is often seen the same way. I decided to draw parallels between Arthur and Redcrosse as both being Christ figures within their respective text. In this sense, as well as mixing with my ideas about the Catholic Church in the paper, I had a good starting point for my own ideas about allegory and why Spenser was using this literary tool. I also briefly mention how Spenser’s text is “a loaded text” in that you have to have some knowledge of what he is attempting as well as an idea around allegory. I envisioned my paper as being a kind of companion piece to the main text that people could have with them as they read The Faerie Queene. This helped me pull back some of my ideas when I was writing.***

Spenser also pays much tribute to England and to Queen Elizabeth in his poem. He links England’s present era to the era of King Arthur by making Arthur a recurring hero in the text. The idea of Arthur as a Christ-like figure is quite important in Spenser’s poem. Spenser uses the Arthur from the classic mythology, the character of Arthur from the Arthurian legend. Spenser uses Arthur to make the connection between England’s past and present. In essence he is legitimizing England by showing this connection to Arthur. England must be the one true power if it is indeed connected to King Arthur, arguably the greatest King who ever ruled. Spenser shows us a young Arthur though in the text. He does this to make the connection between Arthur and Redcrosse as both appear as Christ-like figures in Book I. In Walter Davis’s essay *Spenser and the History of Allegory* he describes Arthur “morally as magnificence, allegorically as Christ coming into the world…” and Redcrosse, like every Christian, must learn from Christ. At the end of Book I, Redcrosse is battling the dragon he was set out to destroy and as the battle rages on he is brought down multiple times by the beast. He is flung into “the well of life” and emerges stronger and significantly more Christ-like. The Well of Life represents baptism for a Christian and we are not really Christian in the eyes of God until we are baptized in this holy water. Every Christian must experience this and if Redcrosse represents the individual Christian than we can start to really see the significance of this event in the poem. Davis again states: “After the fall into “the well of life” or baptism (marking the intersection of old with new convents), Redcrosse emerges as a type of Christ, and his battle acquires the allegorical sense of Christ’s battle with Satan, in addition to the moral.” (Davis, 155-56) We know that in every Christian’s life that they must face temptation (Satan) during different points and this struggle is akin to the battle between Redcrosse and the dragon. Spenser is creating a fantasy epic that is deeply enshrined in the Catholic mythology. It would seem that it would be quite helpful for a reader to have an idea of the allegorical aspects of *The Faerie Queene* before they begin to read the text. Without this foreknowledge an inexperienced reader may be lost at sea reading Spenser’s text which is by in large an extended metaphor for England during the 1500s.

***This paragraph was a crowd control paragraph for me. I knew that I wasn’t going to look at the whole of Spenser’s text in writing this but I still wanted to work in some overall ideas about what Spenser was doing while still using the imagery and text from what we had read in class. I didn’t really know where to put this paragraph, so I used it to segue into my next section about how Spenser’s own ideas had been perceived in his time. In that sense, it seemed to flow pretty well together while still functioning as a standalone paragraph.***

Looking at Spenser’s proposed end game to his text is a bit interesting in that we have an incomplete work before us but we can look at what we *do* have in order to draw some conclusions. The protagonists all represent Protestant ideals and values and the antagonists represent the evils of Catholic Church. For example, when Redcrosse fights Error (the monster who literally represents all of the errors of the Catholic Church) we see a very clear delineation of Protestantism versus Catholicism. When the monster is defeated it vomits up papers which symbolize the pamphlets that were handed out denounced Queen Elizabeth and the Protestants. It is of note that Spenser has Redcrosse defeating Error in that it was his firm belief Protestantism was the true religion and would win out against Catholicism. Spenser wanted to make a statement, a bold one at that, about the current state of the Catholic Church in England and he makes a pretty blunt point as well with *The Faerie Queene*.

***I wasn’t as concerned, in an overall sense, with how Spenser’s writing was perceived but I thought it would be prudent of me to include something about it. It needed to be stated that Spenser wrote for the Queen and that many people would be reading his work. Of course, it is also important to note that the Queen enjoyed The Faerie Queene and this is a good thing for scholars indeed.***

How was this point received by the public though? This is an interesting question to consider when thinking about the impact of *The Faerie Queene* during Spenser’s own time. At the time Spenser was celebrated by the Queen and the majority of the people of England. Most were joyous to have a work that could be considered in the same vein as *The Odyssey* and others. They also enjoyed having a text that was nationally tied to England herself. *The Faerie Queene* is a celebration of England and of Queen Elizabeth and people reveled in this celebratory work. Although the text is political and religious in nature Spenser also creates a monstrous tale of Knights and dragons from days past. He is pulling from many traditions in literature here which makes his text an impressive feat indeed. His readers would have been able to recognize this and see all of the allusions and tributes to past texts.

***These are my specific close reading sections in my paper. I started with more overall themes first and then I move on to smaller details Spenser works in. It always seems important to me to start broadly and then to move into the more minute details for clarity’s sake. If a reader can wrap their head around the larger themes in a text than they should be able to move onto some of the more specific, and perhaps, more subtle aspects of Spenser’s writing. I also included here a parallel to classical epic storytelling which Spenser is working within the confines of as he writes The Faerie Queene. This gives his work some history and allows us to place it in some kind of literary canon. Throughout, I tried to link as much as I could to the Catholic Church and I keep coming back to the imagery of Arthur/Redcrosse as being a Christ figure. It always helps to tie things together as you go for the flow of the paper.***

We can go back a bit again look at the “how” in Spenser’s allegory by analyzing some of the specifics in the poem. First, we can look at some of the larger overarching symbols that Spenser uses throughout the entirety of the poem. The poem takes place in a “faerie land” which is in direct correlation to Spenser’s England at the time. The faerie queene or Gloriana is an allegory for Queen Elizabeth. All of the knights in the poem are on individual quests in Gloriana’s name. The Redcrosse Knight, who himself represents the individual Christian searching for holiness, is journeying to defeat a terrible dragon. Stepping back a moment we know that Spenser intended for each of his twelve books to concern a different knight, who would represent and be searching for a certain virtue, who, when combined, would equal out to the idealized human being. In a sense, Spenser was attempting to show Catholics how to properly live their lives and how to find the one true faith. Spenser modeled much of *The Faerie Queene* on Virgil’s *The Aeneid*. On the surface we see that Spenser is writing an epic poem in a similar vein to Virgil’s great tale. However, digging deeper we can see some other more subtle similarities. In *The Aeneid* Virgil ties Rome to Troy using Augustus’s legacy and Spenser is working the same angle by including Arthur in his epic. If England is supposed to be all powerful, what better symbol to legitimize that power than Arthur? With this in mind we can now begin to break down some of these symbols and look at many of the other allegorical elements in the poem.

***This was the easiest paragraph for me to write because this is where I got to look at all of the specific allegorical images that first drew me to Spenser’s text in the first place. I basically wanted to show off here and see how many images I could put in and then explain what they were within the text. All of these ideas act as evidence to support my own work. I chose images that worked with my overall thesis about allegory as a weapon against the Catholic Church. It wouldn’t make sense to look at imagery that conflicted with my ideas so I stuck with the strong stuff.***

Firstly, we can take a look at some of the positive characters and their respective allegorical images in the text. Redcrosse, as stated before, symbolizes the individual Christian that is searching for ways to better himself. He travels with a woman named Una, or “one truth”, who represents the true faith that a Christian should follow to his or her salvation. These characters are constantly being split apart by the evil characters that represent the Catholic Church and all of its negative connotations for Spenser. The characters of Archimago and Duessa are two nefarious characters that can be perceived as Catholic allegories. Archimago represents Catholic Idolatry and Duessa represents falsehood or a “two-faced” character. These are both Protestant condemnations of problems in the Catholic Church. They resented the idol worship of the Catholics and saw their false faith as cheap. All a Catholic had to do was repent their sins and all would be forgiven as there would be no real punishment for most sins as long as they were confessed. These Catholic symbols are trying to separate Redcrosse (holiness) from Una (one faith) because, in essence, that is what Spenser saw the Catholic Church doing to Christianity. He believed that they were moving them off of the true path to God. With all of these images in mind we can begin to better see what Spenser was really trying to do with his writing.

***I wanted to focus in a bit on the actual task of reading something as large and scary as The Faerie Queene so I took this moment to talk about those things. The ideas here (and the ones I found in my outside sources) helped with some overall closing thoughts on my work here. Again, this was a paragraph where I didn’t know where to place it. After looking at it again, it seemed like a good closing paragraph before my conclusion where I attempted to encapsulate all of my thoughts surrounding my close reading of Spenser’s texts. When you read any text that is outside of your own historical perspective the concepts behind reading that text are also of interest to me. You usually have to change something about the way you read when you read something like this. It is not like reading a modern novel. It is more demanding and, therefore, requires multiple read-through’s to discover its complexity.***

The duality of Spenser’s poem is also an interesting topic to probe. While reading *The Faerie Queene* readers must be acutely aware of the dual purpose of Spenser’s text. It is an allegory about Protestantism versus Catholicism first and an epic adventure poem second. In A.C. Hamilton’s book *The Structure of Allegory in The Faerie Queene* Hamilton says “...in reacting against this romantic indulgence in the poem’s sensuous surface, Spenser’s critics have urged us to seek the hidden allegorical significance.”(Hamilton, 5) Of course, one cannot pick up on all of the symbols that Spenser uses in his massive text so the reader must be able to read the text multiple times in order to fully understand the author’s intentions. This may seem like a daunting task but the real worth of Spenser’s poem is only full fleshed out upon multiple readings. Allegory would not be a subtle tool in an author’s arsenal if the author flat out told his readers what the various subjects symbolized. Spenser clearly had a thorough knowledge of history and literary history and one would do well to brief themselves in some contextual backdrop before reading. *The Faerie Queene* is an incredibly complex tale but it rewards the patient reader many times over when all is said and done.

***I hate conclusion paragraphs and I find them tedious to write. I usually attempt to reiterate some of the stuff I started with but to also look at things from a fresh perspective as well. In this case, I wanted to talk about the legacy of The Faerie Queene and how it stands the test of time even in its unfinished form. Again, I linked the text to epic texts of the past as well as English pride behind the text in an attempt to pull some of my ideas together in the end.***

Looking at Spenser’s text as a whole is, unfortunately, something that we will never be able to do (as it remains mostly unfinished) but the power and beauty of his allegory is something that will stay with many readers long after they read it. It is true that there is much background knowledge needed to fully appreciate Spenser’s sprawling text but even underneath all of the allegorical subtext one can pull out a massively spectacular epic poem that could be read completely as a fantasy adventure that rivals the Homeric epics and *The Aeneid* in scope and poetic beauty. Spenser created a text that Englanders could read with pride as they knew that he had created something that would pass the test of time and become a true classic in its own right.

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